



Guidance on lesson observations of teaching assistants in schools

UNISON guidance

Who are lesson observations for?

Historically, lesson observations have been used to monitor the effectiveness of teachers in schools and to improve teaching and learning.

Increasingly, school support staffs' performance is being observed to measure the impact of their interventions on the progress of pupils. These support staff include:

- HLTA (higher level teaching assistants)
- cover supervisors
- teaching assistants (also referred to as learning support assistants)
- EAL (English as an additional language) support staff
- SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) or ALN (additional learning needs) support staff.

In addition to individual observations, many schools use 'learning walks'.

A learning walk involves a number of lessons being visited for a short period of time during a specified period.

What are lesson observations for?

Both lesson observations and learning walks can be useful opportunities for staff and their managers to reflect on their strengths and areas they may wish to develop if they are conducted in an open and fair manner. Observations need to be supportive and reflective and focused on development needs.

A minority of schools have used observations in a negative and punitive way. UNISON sometimes receives reports that staff do not feel observations have been used positively, which can lead to staff feeling demoralised, stressed and anxious.

The purpose of this guidance is to help you to recognise genuine opportunities to reflect on your own practice and career development but also know what to do in situations where you feel that this might not be the case.

If you feel that your school is using lesson observations for reasons other than to support and develop you contact your UNISON rep/branch for advice.



Good practice

Observations and learning walks should:

- ✓ Be supportive and linked to your professional development.
- ✓ Be based on mutual trust between the observer and the member of staff being observed.
- ✓ Have a clear focus, communicated to the member(s) of staff involved, regarding what the observer will be looking for.
- ✓ Be carried out by a fully-trained professional, i.e. a line manager and/or qualified teacher. The only exception to this is peer observation, when staff observe each other as a part of their learning.
- ✓ Take place after the member of staff has been given sufficient notice (at least one week).
- ✓ Follow the procedures laid down in the school's lesson observation policy. This policy must have been agreed by UNISON members and their representatives prior to being implemented.

Poor practice

Observations and learning walks should not:

- ✗ Be graded as 'Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement or Inadequate'. These grades are used by Ofsted (England) and Estyn (Wales) for whole school inspections and should not be used to judge individuals.
- ✗ Be graded in any other way, e.g a number scale. Observations are subjective judgements that should form the basis of reflective discussion, not be 'scored'.
- ✗ Have a direct link with capability procedures.
- ✗ Be used as part of any disciplinary process.
- ✗ Be part of pay and grading decisions in performance management/appraisals.

After an observation

Once you have been observed, you should receive both verbal and written feedback within a reasonable timescale. The observer should make an appointment with you for verbal feedback as soon as possible after the observation has taken place, and preferably within the next 24 hours. Only once this discussion has taken place should written feedback be given. It is reasonable to receive this within five working days.



How often should you be observed?

There is no legal minimum or maximum for the number of times a year that you should be observed, but it should not be excessive. Different workplaces will interpret that in different ways and the number and duration of lesson observations should be made clear in the organisation's lesson observation policy.

Lesson observations and inspections

You may be observed during an Ofsted/Estyn inspection at any time when you are working with pupils, such as one-to-one in class support, small group interventions or providing cover/delivering lessons for a whole class. Covering or delivering lessons should only apply to cover supervisors and HLTAAs in line with the NJC job profiles.

Any proposal for teaching assistants or other staff to take lessons should be raised with your UNISON branch.

Professional standards for teaching assistants (England only)

While the teaching assistant standards are not compulsory, UNISON strongly recommends that they are used by schools. They were developed by a coalition of unions and educational experts, led by UNISON. As these standards reflect what 'good' looks like, UNISON believes that they can be used to help give focus to any lesson observation that is for appraisal or performance management purposes. The teaching assistant standards for teaching and learning are:

- **Demonstrate an informed and efficient approach to teaching and learning** by adopting relevant strategies to support the work of the teacher and increase achievement of all pupils including, where appropriate, those with special educational needs and disabilities.
- **Promote, support and facilitate inclusion** by encouraging participation of all pupils in learning and extracurricular activities.
- **Use effective behaviour management strategies consistently** in line with the school's policy and procedures.
- **Contribute to effective assessment and planning** by supporting the monitoring, recording and reporting of pupil performance and progress as appropriate to the level of the role.
- **Communicate effectively and sensitively with pupils** to adapt to their needs and support their learning.
- **Maintain a stimulating and safe learning environment** by organising and managing physical teaching space and resources.

In Wales, professional standards for supporting teaching and learning are currently being developed by the Welsh Government. When implemented (expected to be autumn 2018) they will apply to Teaching / Learning Support Assistants.

The full advice on the professional standards for teaching assistants can be found in the resources at www.unison.org.uk/schools (search 'professional standards').



Professional standards for HLTA

The professional standards for HLTA are compulsory. If you are awarded HLTA status you should ensure that you are fully aware of the requirements.

You can see the standards at <http://hlta.org.uk>

Professional development for support staff

Your career development is very important. You can find further details of training and qualifications available to you on the UNISON Skills for Schools website at www.skillsforschools.org.uk

If you have any questions or concerns over how lesson observations are being used in your school contact your UNISON rep/branch for advice.

More resources for UNISON members

UNISON is the largest union for school support staff in the UK. We provide expert advice and guidance on professional issues as well as support if you have a problem at work.

We have advice on managing behaviour; dealing with health needs; 'rarely cover' arrangements; and much more – ask your branch about what they can order for free from the schools section of our catalogue at www.unison.org.uk/catalogue

We also run courses and training for UNISON members. Find out more at <https://learning.unison.org.uk> or contact your UNISON learning rep or branch.

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